

**Testimony of Shari L. Shapiro, Executive Director Kids in Crisis**

**Raised Bill No. 981**

**An Act Concerning the Placement of Young Children in Congregate Care Facilities**

Senator Musto, Representative Urban, Representative Fawcett, distinguished members of the Select Committee on Children my name is Shari Shapiro and I am the Executive Director of Kids in Crisis and a member of the Connecticut Association of Non-Profits Children's Council. I am here today because I am very concerned about the negative impact that Raised Bill No. 981 will have on Connecticut's most vulnerable citizens, young children.

As the Executive Director of Kids in Crisis for over 30 years I know firsthand the difference emergency respite care makes in the lives of children and teens in crisis. We all want the same thing: long term success and well being for Connecticut's children. None of us wants to see young children in congregate care. Let's set the record straight and correctly define congregate care versus emergency care. Emergency care, like what we do at Kids in Crisis, is immediate and temporary...designed to be a weigh station on a child's journey to a more permanent home. Congregate care is long-term placement of children in a group setting. Just as we wouldn't classify hospital emergency departments as assisted living, classifying emergency shelter programs such as Kids in Crisis as congregate care is wildly inaccurate.

The reality is that many young children in crisis need an emergency placement where they can have their physical and emotional needs quickly assessed and an appropriate plan of action swiftly developed. The children can THEN be returned home with support services or moved to a foster home or relative care. Foster homes cannot provide the quality or depth of emergency assessments to identify serious medical conditions...mental health issues...or serious behavioral problems. These are all critical questions that can't be answered immediately but require answers. That's what short-term emergency care does.

The bill as it is designed is fraught with peril. The proposed legislation states that a child under the age of 6 or a sibling group with a child under the age of 6 can only be placed in "congregate care" if the child has severe health needs. Yet, a child's true medical and mental health condition is rarely known at the time of removal. Placing a child at an emergency shelter such as Kids in Crisis ensures that a comprehensive physical exam can be done by our onsite Nurse Practitioner within 48 hours. Other psychological and

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behavioral exams can take place at the same time, allowing quick placement recommendations. Ultimately, this increases the opportunity for Connecticut's children to successfully return home, to a relative or to a foster home.

Here's another major problem with the bill as proposed: It is unrealistic to expect the Commissioner can certify to the court that all attempts were made to place a child with a family before they are placed in an emergency program. Almost always, a child removed from their home is an emergency, and rarely occurs Monday through Friday during business hours. Safe Homes, like Kids in Crisis, are designed to respond to a child in crisis 24 hours a day.

That's what Safe Homes are designed to do...assess kids' physical and emotional needs, stabilize their behaviors, plan for them to find a permanent home...all while keeping siblings together during a tumultuous time when they may only have each other.

Let me close by saying, with more than 30 years experience of caring for Connecticut children, the proposed legislation will:

- Put deeply troubled kids in private homes without assessing their needs and arranging community supports.
- Increase the number of foster parents who have to deal with very unstable children, perhaps driving them away from the system for good
- Place an additional strain on an already overburdened foster care system
- Assure that fewer kids will receive assessments, stabilization, and planning
- Damage the ability of these children to successfully transition into permanent, stable homes.

If this legislation is enacted there's a strong chance that the safety and well being of children who have been removed from their homes because of neglect, abuse and hardship will be threatened. Which one of us could look into the eyes of these children and deny them the emergency short-term placements that will help them get the safety and security into their lives that they need and deserve?

Thank you

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